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Action Research: A Review and Proposal for Application in Marketing Inquiry

Abstract

Action research has a very limited track record in marketing. We take an applied and practical approach and begin with a review of action research as a method, then turn to a more focused review of action research in marketing contexts, discussing the plausible constraints and advantages. Based on these reviews, we offer a conceptual framework and several application areas for marketing action research. We summarize case study examples from three market locations that have used action research as a method of inquiry to illustrate and encourage researchers and practitioners to further integrate action research in their research endeavors. We conclude with discussions on future research directions.

Keywords

Action Research, Marketing Inquiry, Consumption, Interpretive Method, Qualitative Methodology

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Action Research: A Review and Proposal for Application in Marketing Inquiry

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Action research has a very limited track record in marketing. We take an applied and practical approach and begin with a review of action research as a method, then turn to a more focused review of action research in marketing contexts, discussing the plausible constraints and advantages. Based on these reviews, we offer a conceptual framework and several application areas for marketing action research. We summarize case study examples from three market locations that have used action research as a method of inquiry to illustrate and encourage researchers and practitioners to further integrate action research in their research endeavors. We conclude with discussions on future research directions. Keywords: Action Research, Marketing Inquiry, Consumption, Interpretive Method, Qualitative Methodology

Introduction

Action research differs from conventional scientific research methods in that it requires ongoing collaborative efforts between researchers and the group(s) being researched; in terms of identifying, defining, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, assessing, and acting upon a problem in actual and ongoing organizational or social settings. It is lauded for its engagement with material circumstances in studying an issue or a problem. Its cyclical and flexible processes create a platform for participants to make tangible differences to the issue at hand. These unique characteristics of action research make it an appropriate method for researching and solving practical social problems.

Because of its applied nature, action research was first used by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in *applied* social science fields desiring both to investigate and act upon a range of issues. As the lines between applied and pure social sciences become blurred, the adoption of action research as a mode of inquiry is increasing. Action research also found applications in social science disciplines like anthropology (Chambers, 2000; Singer, 1993, 1994), sociology (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014), and political science (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). As Singer (1993) noted, the “ethnographic Other is no longer available and pliant, awaiting anthropological representation, but has acquired a voice... Community-centered [action] research [is]...a more appropriate response to contemporary social realities. In this approach, the anthropologist seeks collaboration with the Other in the struggle for self-determination” (p. 15).

The main objectives of this paper are: (a) to provide a concise overview of action research as a method; (b) to explore the suitability of action research in marketing inquiries; and (c) to propose pathways to more vigorous applicability and use of action research in marketing. We begin with a brief discussion of action research as a method in general—its origin, types, and significant uses in managerial and organizational settings. Then, we discuss the applicability of action research as a method for exploring marketing and consumption

related topics. We propose several marketing topics suited for action research. We then discuss merits and challenges of action research method in marketing and conclude with selected examples highlighting the use of action research in marketing inquiries.

Overview of Action Research

Detailed discussions of action research are available in Gummesson (2000), Reason and Bradbury (2008), and Zuber-Skerritt (1992).

History and origin of action research. Action research took roots in the Science in Education movement of the late 19th century in the United States (McKernan, 1991), and was formalized as a major method by psychologist Kurt Lewin in studying group dynamics in the 1940s (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

Two research groups—the Center for Group Dynamics (CGD) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) led by Kurt Lewin, and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London—were influential in the development of action research. The Center for Group Dynamics (CGD), established in 1945, emphasized involvement and group pressure as instigators to achieving change. Across the Atlantic, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London emerged in 1920 through its early research on civil repatriation of German prisoners of war. Both the CGD and the Tavistock Institute emphasized researcher-practitioner collaboration, and the affirmative role of group relations as a basis for problem-solving.

Action research: Foundation for its usefulness to social sciences research. Lewin argued that social scientists had to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry to intimately understand and effectively change social practices (McKernan, 1991). Practical problems in organizations often require an exploratory, reflexive research method. Wilson (2004) notes that prescriptive literature is of little help to companies that seek major changes or improvements. This inadequacy may be partly due to the shortcomings of prescriptive approaches: A dominant assumption in prescriptive literature is that there is an extremely well-defined problem and noise or contingency variables are controlled or accounted for (Wilson, 2004). There are clearly difficulties in applying the positivistic paradigm for conducting research that can lead to effective change in noisy real-life settings.

Action research, by contrast, is suited to tackle issues characterized by high degrees of uncertainty. As Ballantyne (2004, p. 335, emphasis added) puts it, “the ‘research’ component in action research essentially means research for the project, not research about the project.” Indeed, action research is a reflexive, iterative processes that provide privileged and direct access to reality (Clark, 1972), making it superior to many alternative research strategies in terms of solving practical organizational and business problems (Dick, 2000; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2000).

Action research: What it is and its uniqueness as a research method. For this paper, we adopt the definition of action research from Reason and Bradbury (2006). They characterize action research as “the whole family of approaches to inquiry which are participative, grounded in experience, and action-oriented” (p. xxiv) and “to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people” (p. 1).

Grundy (1998) discusses three types of action research based on the participation level of an action researcher: technical, practical, and emancipatory. Other authors (e.g., Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; McKernan, 1991) also discuss three similar types of action research, using different labels. In Table 1, we summarize these three types of action research. Action

research can also be classified in terms of its “voice”—“third-person,” “second-person,” and “first-person”—depending on how research is framed, conducted, and represented to research participants or other audiences (Chandler & Torbert, 2003).

Table 1: Three Types of Action Research (AR)

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Technical AR</i>	<i>Practical AR</i>	<i>Emancipatory AR</i>
Point of Departure	Researcher identifies problem and intervention	Researcher and facilitator jointly identify the problem, underlying causes and intervention	Researcher, facilitator and other participants collaboratively identify the problem
Role of Action Researcher	Technical and facilitatory; consultative expert to the facilitator	A Socratic role; encourages participation and reflection among participants	Highest form of involvement and participation; a co-researcher with other participants
Communication Flow	Primarily between researcher and facilitator (“Closed Network” Stringer, 1999, p. 130)	Broader, encompassing beyond the facilitator to embrace other participants into the communication and feedback loop (“Linking Network” Stringer, 1999, p. 131)	Broad and open, critical and reflective, empowering, a feedback loop that is fed into action and reflecting phases of the project
Primary Goal	Promotes effective and efficient practice	Improves practice through application of personal wisdom of participants	Promotes critical consciousness among practitioners toward the problem and change Aims at participants’ empowerment and self-confidence
Unique Characteristics	Addresses a specific problem Change has short lived impact Simplest form of action research A normal and common form of a consultant’s project	Addresses a specific problem Change has longer lasting impact due to the higher participatory involvement of participants	Collaborative process to identify problems Enlightenment is retrospective Resulting strategic action is forward-looking

The three types do not differ methodologically, but are somewhat distinctive in terms of underlying assumptions, participation, and the roles of participants. In general, action research intertwines four basic themes: (1) empowerment of participants, (2) collaboration through participation, (3) acquisition of knowledge, and (4) effecting change. The processes that researchers go through to achieve these themes constitute the spiral of “action research cycles” composed of an *iterative* progression of four phases: planning, acting (i.e., implementing the plan), observing (i.e., evaluating the implementation of the plan), and reflecting on the results of the previous phases (Dick, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; Zuber-Skerrit & Perry, 2000).

An emphasis on “participative action” and “critical reflective communication” among participants distinguishes action research from other methods (Dick, 2000; Whyte, 1989). These two components are important because action research is “a form of inquiry grounded in the actions of its participants and their critical reflections about the consequences of their actions” (Ballantyne, 2004, p. 323).

For an action research project to succeed in organizational settings, action researchers must take into account some additional considerations. First, both the researcher and practitioner must acknowledge that a problem exists and that change is necessary (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). Second, senior management's support and employees' buy-in must be secured (Kates & Robertson, 2004). The lack of either of these conditions may inhibit the fulfillment of the project. Third, action researchers must stay alert to the organizational culture and values that may impede the progress and agenda of a project (Kates & Robertson, 2004). Fourth, for action researchers to become a credible change catalyst, they must possess adequate knowledge of the conceptual theory pertaining to the topic under investigation and develop intimate knowledge of the contextual field. Finally, the interaction with participants requires that action researchers possess diplomacy and relationship management skills, are flexible and open throughout the iterative process, and are able to manage varying layers of personalities and levels of knowledge across participants (Ballantyne, 2004; Cunningham, 1993).

Limited Use of Action Research in Marketing Studies

The adoption of action research in marketing has been slow and limited. Kates and Robertson (2004) indicated that there were a sparse number of studies addressing action research in the academic marketing literature. They further raised the question of whether action research could be successfully applied to marketing. In the discussion here, we first lay out some barriers to applying action research in marketing. Then, we present our proposed framework under which "action research in marketing" can operate successfully.

Action research scholars suggest several reasons why action research in marketing is rare. The nature of marketing organizations might impede the successful application of action research. Marketing inherently deals with external forces—environmental factors, economic conditions, market conditions, competitive forces, industry or product specific characteristics, and consumer demand (Perry & Gummeson, 2004). Marketing often finds itself laboring to satisfy ever-shifting consumer tastes to enable the organization to remain competitive. This focus, while fruitful for marketing performance, deprives a marketing organization of the time and flexibility for assessing and effecting organizational change. In other words, many marketing situations involve putting out fires brought about by external forces; hence there is often little time for practitioners to investigate the underlying causes of the fires. Moreover, marketing practitioners are often consumed by activities that deliver short-time objectives. As a result, conducting action research in marketing is perceived as challenging because in "marketing, the company's external environment is always more important..." (Gummeson, 2000, p. 105). The challenge for action research in marketing is that practitioners must consciously buy into the benefits of the action research process and be committed to iterative and collaborative framework of the research, even while realizing the primacy of the external environment over internal processes.

Another major obstacle to action research in many organizations is that reflection about practices, procedures, processes, and effectiveness is an unwelcome task and seen as a threat (Kates & Robertson, 2004). Organizational culture may impede an effective action research project if it discounts the freedom of employees to be critically reflexive of practice, processes, or procedures of an organization (Kates & Robertson, 2004). Action researchers must determine whether the success of a project requires cultural change. If change is necessary, action researchers' intellectual, emotional, and political qualifications are paramount assets to the change processes (Kates & Robertson, 2004).

Conceptual Model of Action Research in Marketing

We propose that action research in marketing is multilayered and multidimensional. Figure 1 provides a schematic illustration of this framework. First, it is multilayered because the marketing organization is an entity that operates within a larger organism with its own enveloping culture and values. Action researchers must therefore be attentive to the influence of the broader culture and values throughout the process of a research project. In other words, we propose that action researchers in marketing should adopt the *hermeneutic* view towards marketing inquiries—that the parts can only be understood with the whole and vice versa (Gummesson, 2000). This hermeneutic approach brings more dimensions into focus: moving from pre-understanding to understanding on a higher level, moving from parts to the whole and to the parts again with greater understanding, moving back and forth between the substantive and specific level to the abstract and general level (Gummesson, 2005), thereby re-enacting the iterative processes of planning, acting, reflecting and observing by putting what is known and learned between the parts and the whole into contexts.

Second, action research in marketing is multidimensional because it embraces multiple groups of participants (management, employees, suppliers, distributors and other external stakeholders such as customers and the community), which means multiple goals and interests are at stake. It is imperative that action researchers and the marketing organization establish a common strategic intent at an early stage to guide their action research project.

Figure 1: Multilayered and Multidimensional Characteristics of Action Research in Marketing



Source: Authors' conceptualization.

Applications of Action Research in Marketing

Several application areas in marketing are suitable for action research. Ballantyne (2004, p. 336) suggests that “action research is a rubric of applied research of varying scope and scale” and has applications in many internal marketing contexts, especially when there are conflicting knowledge claims across inter-functional departments. Examples include sales management teams, product development cycles, service system redesign, supply chain management, and buyer/supplier partnerships. We suggest that action research is applicable to multiple and varied areas in marketing including but not limited to:

- Addressing strategic marketing planning, especially in times of major change (e.g., rebranding, new product introduction, new market penetration).
- Addressing work relationship and processes among functions and departments of the organization (e.g., product planning, production, sales and distribution, services marketing, advertising and sales promotion, market research).
- Business-to-business (B2B) contexts (e.g., customer relationship management).
- Start-up marketing organizations, where it may be particularly beneficial because there are minimal barriers from organizational culture.
- Change in consumer behavior and consumption habits, especially when there exists a compelling reason for change on the part of the consumer (e.g., healthy living, environmental conservation, and recycling).

Selected Examples of Action Research in Marketing and Market-Related Issues

The international examples discussed here substantiate our aforementioned conceptual framework and demonstrate that action research in marketing settings is attainable and can lead to shared benefits across multiple stakeholders.

Costa Rica: Improving farmers’ product standardization (Faure, Hocde, & Chia, 2010)

As Costa Rica went through market liberalization process, intensifying and rapid changes to the farm structures required farmers to comply with set standards and processes imposed by governments, importers or consumers. Smaller farmers, who could not comply with the new standards, were excluded from the trade. Farmers’ organizations (FO) were crucial in assisting small farmers by providing a platform for services and access to commercialized markets for the farmers’ products.

In the presence of these new set standards and processes, three institutions—a FO (Mesa Nacional Campesina [MNC]), the Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganaderia [MAG]), and CIRAD (French Agricultural Research Center for International Development)—set up a three-year program (2003-2005) to strengthen the capacities of FOs in assisting small farmers’ compliance with the new standards.

The MAG-CIRAD-MNC program researcher proposed an action research approach for three AR-verified reasons: (i) lack of ready-made solutions to address the concerns of the FOs; (ii) a need to better understand the constraints and limitations faced by FOs and farmers through an on-going dialog; and (iii) the necessity to work closely with the FOs and farmers to identify implementable solutions that would be acceptable to them. The researchers and stakeholders from the three institutions conducted two participatory action research projects to (i) assist

farmers and FOs with standard compliance and (ii) preserve the diversity of agricultural farming practices by Costa Rican small farmers.

Through collaborative effort, the research project drew some integrative lessons and solutions for farmers including (i) lessons about farmers' capacities to design technical specifications based on their own and collective knowledge, and (ii) a handbook containing different ways to produce that comply with market requirements and standardizations while considering each farmer's resources and constraints.

Finland: Co-creating meaning for the development of a market-focused strategic flexibility (Gylling, Elliott, & Toivonen, 2012)

Another example of successful application of action research in marketing is the case of the rental services of a Finnish insurance company. The nature of a property rental firm required that it involved multilevel subcontracting firms in providing the service to customers (tenants) via facility management, cleaning, maintenance, catering, and such. The owner of the firm was aware of the weaknesses in the subcontracting chain and wanted to work with the researchers to find solutions to some of the weaknesses. Using a participatory action research approach, the researchers concluded that for a firm to develop market-focused strategic flexibility, a common understanding of the firm's value promises must be met—and co-creation of meaning among internal and external parties of the understanding of value promises was found to be an effective way to achieving the desired change.

Southeast Asia: Internal marketing as a solution to counterproductive workplace behaviors (Eng & Tang, 2014)

A Southeast Asia's regional engineering solutions company was experiencing a range of counterproductive behaviors by its employees. Employees had low morale, low commitment, poor motivation, high absenteeism and turnover. Job engagement was at an all-time low. In addition, many employees were abusing the overtime system to clock extra hours in order to earn higher salaries; the average annual overtime per employee was 1.7 months. This led to a huge increase in the company's overhead expenses in 2014. In an effort to control operating costs, the company's management needed to identify the causes and implementable solutions. The researchers applied a technical action research approach and established several causes and solutions conducive to successful execution for the company.

The researchers found that the company had a very strong competitive position in its industry, which should contribute favorably to staff morale. Its pay scale, however, was not competitive and there was a lack of active internal marketing programs. To make matter worse, the high turnover rate coupled with the non-existence of internal marketing led to an ever-fluctuating workplace and organizational culture. The researchers and key staff developed rigorous internal marketing programs (in addition to recommendations on HR policies and processes). The impacts of these programs (within a 6-month benchmark period) include higher overall staff sentiment rating (+9%) and lower overtime overhead cost for the company (-3%).

Conclusion

Action research in marketing is sparse. Many factors contribute to its low acceptance and use in marketing. The turbulent, time-pressured, fast-moving nature of marketing is often cited as a major reason for the low application of action research in the field. We argue that action research was developed as a method for effecting change during turbulent times, and thus is highly suited for ushering in changes in marketing and market-related contexts. We

presented three case examples that illustrate and support our argument for the applicability and use of action research approach for marketing and market-related inquiries.

We offer a conceptual framework of marketing action research (Figure 1) that is multilayered and multidimensional. This framework equips researchers and practitioners adopting action research for a marketing study with an entirety lens to the iterative cyclical process of an action research, the multiple participants in the research, and the inherently intertwined (yet possibly conflicting) goals from these multiple stakeholders.

An avenue for extending the proposed framework is the examination of tacit knowledge literature (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000) and its implications for action research in marketing, especially since action research and marketing rely on their participants' tacit knowledge. Action research will also benefit from internal marketing literature. Internal marketing views an organization as a market, placing employees' motivation and satisfaction in center stage akin to putting customer satisfaction at the center of a firm's outward activities (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; George, 1990; Grönroos, 1981). A future research exploring the interconnections and shared grounds of the three areas—action research, tacit knowledge, and internal marketing—can advance the framework for action research in marketing.

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